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Leading to develop a culture of learning : a reflective essay

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Leading to develop a culture of learning : a reflective essay

Abstract

As a principal, being the instructional leader is a tremendous challenge. An instructional leader is a principal who knows the students in the school and is a constant advocate of what is best for them. Carrying the title of Principal does not automatically qualify you as an instructional leader. Instructional leaders set high expectations for the school community and support those members in reaching the expectations. This is done by being on the front lines, attending to student needs, researching best practice and learning and practicing strategies with the teachers. It is only in this capacity that an instructional leader can understand what is truly going on in their school and if it is beneficial for children. When they jump in and participate right along with the teachers, they can see to it that instructional programs within the school support the school's overall goals.

**LEADING TO DEVELOP A CULTURE OF LEARNING
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

A Research Paper

Presented to

**The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
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**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education**

by

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I have been driven to become an elementary principal since early in my school career. It has long been my vision to share my love of learning with the students I teach. As a teacher, my energy and enthusiasm makes learning fun and rewarding for the students in my class. As an administrator, I hope to spread that energy and enthusiasm and make it contagious among the school community. I have an intrinsic motivation to help others succeed. Of course, there is so much more to being a principal than just enjoying the job you do and exemplifying that for everyone to see. An exceptional principal can carry that enthusiasm into all areas of leadership. Whether it is helping teachers get hooked on a new strategy, supporting the use of data to really drive teaching practice, sustaining positive interaction with parents and students, dealing with a sticky situation so teachers can teach, or taking time to build community relationships that benefit the campus vision, this enthusiasm will strengthen my ability to be a successful administrator.

The field of education is much more complex than the general public would believe. In order to become an effective educator, I believe one must be driven to instill a love of learning within each child they encounter. Upon entering pre-service training, it is impossible for future teachers to understand the enormity of the job ahead. If that drive is present, it becomes much easier to get through the surprises that present themselves during the first few years of teaching. Of course, in my opinion, education is among the noblest and most indispensable professions in existence. In what other job can one wear such a multitude of hats daily? The impact teachers can have on their students is immeasurable. Not only are teachers responsible for delivering the curriculum, but they become confidants, care takers, coaches,

counselors and even parents at times. When entering the school house doors at 8 o'clock in the morning, educators assume enormous responsibility. The children in that class and in that school become our children. Our actions influence their future successes and failures. Many times the consistency provided by teachers is one of few stable things in their turbulent lives.

School leaders, whether administrators or teacher leaders, are not just responsible for the success a class full of students, but for the success of the entire student body and professional learning community. If we are to portray the importance of education to our students, we as educators need to be committed to lifelong learning ourselves. Those teachers and administrators who are constantly striving to do better and learn more to benefit their students will make the greatest impact on the children they serve. Great leaders always have something else to learn. In order to leave a lasting impression on students that will impact the persons they become, we need to show them that successful people make things happen by striving to become the very best in everything they do. If we model this belief and live it every day, the students will follow suit. Leaders in education promote that success within the school community by supporting and developing the best in the people around them, whether within students or their colleagues.

As a principal, being the instructional leader is a tremendous challenge. An instructional leader is a principal who knows the students in the school and is a constant advocate of what is best for them. Carrying the title of Principal does not automatically qualify you as an instructional leader. Instructional leaders set high expectations for the school community and support those members in reaching the expectations. This is done by being on the front lines,

attending to student needs, researching best practice and learning and practicing strategies with the teachers. It is only in this capacity that an instructional leader can understand what is truly going on in their school and if it is beneficial for children. When they jump in and participate right along with the teachers, they can see to it that the instructional programs within the school support the schools overall goals.

A driven principal can be the vehicle for change within the building. In order to facilitate a change that will impact student achievement, principals need to possess strong communication and conflict resolution skills. The facilitation process that takes place can determine whether the change process will be a rocky road or if consensus can be reached. As a principal it is important to be confident and knowledgeable. There is a fervent need to develop relationships and build capacity among the staff. Good principals are cognizant of little details within the organization that could impact the goals and vision. I have come to believe that the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively and build relationships on all levels are some of the most important skills administrators can possess. This professional collaboration can bring out the strengths in people, which will indeed benefit everyone within the community.

As a future educational leader, I hope to become a principal who will create a shared vision that will impact student achievement for all students. I understand that often there can be difficulty in building a shared vision. It is my belief that making decisions based on data will provide a solid base on which to build a shared vision. In order to become the best educational leader that I can be, I will incorporate what I believe to be critical elements essential for success as an exemplary leader of learning. It is imperative that I work hard to become the leader of

learning within the school, strive to be a change agent while working toward the school vision, foster professional growth while building on staff strengths and develop servant leadership within myself and others.

Leader of Learning

The first critical element to becoming an exemplary educational leader is to stand out as the leader of learning within the school. The complexity of becoming an effective instructional leader has become increasingly obvious throughout my time as a practitioner in the classroom. As a school's instructional leader, the principal is responsible for supporting the instructional program in various ways, which in turn leads to success of the campus vision. Fundamentally, however the instructional leader is in charge of advocating for, nurturing and sustaining school culture and climate. The amount of reflection that is required of a teacher, although astounding, appears to pale in comparison to the reflection that an administrator needs to incorporate in order to be truly effective in their position. When reflecting on practice and deliberating decisions to be made, the school's instructional leader should always ask themselves "Is this what is best for the students?" and "Was the decision I made beneficial to student learning?".

In order to foster instructional excellence, which is the heart of instructional leadership, open communication, clear expectations and high standards that echo throughout the organization are paramount. Much of the research that I have encountered about instructional leadership attributes many of the successes and/or failures of an administrator to the relationships that are built within the school community. These relationships occur between administrators and staff, the collegial community of staff members, administration and staff to

students and among the student population themselves. Relationships are not built overnight. In order to build concrete relationships, effective administrators need to be great communicators. Hensley and Burmeister (2004) found that great communicators are described as "... not only good writers and good speakers, they are honest, trustworthy and credible individuals who have good listening skills and good interpersonal skills" (p. 30).

Communication begins with the principal. A principal who is an instructional leader, according to Blase & Blase (1999), "talks openly and freely with teachers about teaching and learning" and "provides time for and encourages peer connections for teachers" (p. 17). In addition to building relationships and fostering communication among staff and students, leaders of instruction;

... avoid restrictive and intimidating approaches to teachers, believe in teacher choice and discretion, integrate collaboration, peer coaching, inquiry, collegial study groups and reflective discussion to promote professional dialogue, embrace growth and change, respect teachers' knowledge and abilities and are committed not only to enacting school improvement and reform, but also to enhancing professional community in schools (Blase and Blase 2001, p. 22).

This supports their belief that "instructional leadership is embedded in school culture; it is expected and routinely delivered" (Blase & Blase, 2001, p. 22). Throughout the discussions that come from open and honest communication an instructional leader's expectations be clearly articulated. The articulation of these expectations and high standards is then welcomed because there is a culture and climate of reciprocal respect. Furthermore, the instructional leader supports

the expectations that are shared throughout the organization. All expectations are for naught if the support is not given to achieve these expectations.

With the ebb and flow of education and the constant changes that take place in our profession, another necessary component of instructional leadership is the development of resilient schools and students. Resiliency, as paraphrased from Peter Holly and Kay Forsythe's work, is the ability to adapt to change, and often times turn the changes that could shake lesser individuals into advantages. Principals need to be resilient in order to deal with everything they encounter daily. "Resilient school leaders, moreover, create resilient school organizations: contexts within which "resiliency" is encouraged to thrive at every level." (Holly & Forsythe, 2004) According to Holly and Forsythe, administrators need to:

"establish a "can-do" atmosphere of human possibility, excellence and optimism; recognize their strengths and compensate for their acknowledged weaknesses; nurture their own skill development by establishing higher goals for themselves and discern the fit between one's perceived skills and the organizational requirements. Above all, however, they must be able to motivate and capacitate all those around them to do the same things." (Holly & Forsythe, p. 216-217)

It is this empowerment of teachers and students that causes instructional excellence to flourish within the school community.

As a future elementary principal, and a reflective classroom practitioner, I will continue to incorporate reflective practices throughout my career in education. In order to continue to be reflective in administration, I need to keep up with the current research, and understand the

implications for my future practice. Reflective people build resiliency because they are open to changes and respond to those changes in a productive and positive manner.

Elaine Wilmore, author of Principal Leadership, states that, "The principal becomes the nurturer of the entire school community" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 34). In many ways, the principal's job is to 'rally the troops' and keep them focused on or nurture the vision. This ties into the compelling research in the areas of communication and relationship building. Nurturing promotes the empowerment of all stakeholders. Sharing leadership and empowering teachers improves instruction in a way that mere management cannot. As an instructional leader, it will be my priority to create a climate and culture for shared leadership. The importance of empowerment has become evident, not only in the research that I have read, but throughout my experience as a classroom teacher. In recent years, when I have been afforded the opportunity to help make decisions that are affecting me, I have become much more invested in my teaching and learning. When teachers and administrators are working together to achieve the enormous goal of teaching to reach all learners, they are part of the lifelong learning process themselves. Shared leadership is the only way to even begin to attain this goal. Empowered teachers feel a sense of trust and respect for and from their administrators. Teachers who trust their administrator will work hard and that hard work will spiral down throughout the organization.

Put simply, an effective instructional leader is a principal who knows the students in the school and is a constant advocate of what is best for them. They merge the vision for where they want the school to be with the instructional program that will support the vision while involving all stakeholders. All goals addressed by the community center around student learning. The

principal, as instructional leader is the vehicle for change within the building. It is their job to see that the staff and students remain focused on the goal and to "begin with the end in mind" (Wilmore, 2002, p. 21) then follow it through.

It seems to me that with truly effective instructional leadership a cyclical process emerges: Relationships are built within the school among teachers, students and administration, the school climate thrives, the students and staff work harder and the vision is successful. When a school's climate is good, the feeling resonates throughout the building and the students and staff want to do well. The cycle repeats itself and the school is a good place to be. A good instructional leader is in the midst of this process always working with, advocating for, encouraging and driving the success of the school.

Leader of Change

The second critical element in becoming an exemplary educational leader is to become a change agent within the organization. "Leaders, in the ways they exercise leadership, are critical to the success of their organizations and the efforts to undertake organizational change" (Holly & Forsythe, p. 220). "With accountability pressures requiring rapid change, the burden falls on the principal to make it happen" (Protheroe, 2005, p. 54). If true transformation is going to take place within the school that will improve student learning, the principal needs to be deeply immersed in the conversion. There are many positions that an administrator needs to play in the "game" of school change. First and foremost, the principal is "the coach". In this pivotal role an

administrator is able to initiate and facilitate the change process. To initiate change, it is crucial that the principal assists in targeting a school vision and ensures ownership of all staff members. "The coach" needs to lead and provide direction.

"A recent study on school leadership identifies [two essential objectives critical to any organization's effectiveness; helping the organization set a defensible set of directions, and influencing members to move in those directions. Leadership is both this simple and this complex] (Leithwood et.al. 2004). The authors of the study talk about three sets of practices that make up the core of good leadership. In their view, without leadership focused on setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization to meet changing demands, not much would happen (Protheroe, 2005, p. 54).

Often in reform efforts, the principal is not only the coach, but becomes a key player in the game. A good team member has a knack for knowing when to run and when to pass the ball on to teammates. Not being afraid to share the responsibility and decision-making is how capacity begins to develop. I appreciate the importance of leadership at all levels and how this is explained in detail within Holly & Forsythe's (2004) synthesis of Fullan's 2002 work.

As Fullan (2002) explains, while effective school leaders are key to large-scale, sustainable education reform, an organization cannot flourish for long on the strength of the actions of the top leader alone. Schools and school districts, he says, need many leaders at many system levels. Indeed, he argues that charismatic leaders are now being seen as a liability for sustained improvement; the "cult of

the individual" tends to last as long as the leader - leaving dire succession issues in his or her wake. Fullan quotes Collins (2001) as saying that leaders who build enduring greatness are not high-profile, flashy performers, but "individuals who blend extreme personal humility with intense professional will." In recalling his 2001 book *Leading in a Culture of Change*, Fullan (2002) argues that such leaders are attuned to the big picture, are sophisticated conceptual thinkers, and are capable of transforming their organizations through the people and teams within them. (Holly & Forsythe, 2004, p. 233).

As I reflect on these statements about change it becomes clear to me that one of the most powerful acts of administrative effectiveness is that of empowering others. Much of the research that I have read, points strongly towards collective and collaborative leadership. Although the success of a transformation does rely heavily on the principal in a school, it is more heavily dependent on the team of individuals responsible for carrying out the changing, the staff.

Often during the game, it is necessary for "the coach" to take a seat in the bleachers and become an observer. This allows for the leaders within the staff to step up and become key players in the game. Building leadership capacity within the school occurs over time, and is highly dependent on a principal who is willing to work collaboratively with the school staff. The phases of school improvement; "The Instructional Phase, The Transitional Phase and the High Leadership Capacity Phase", described by Linda Lambert in her article also suggest the need for an administrator to play differing roles during school transformation. "Principals and teachers travel through three phases as their schools build high leadership capacity that sustains

improvement" (Lambert 2005, p. 62). Her study suggests a correlation between high leadership capacity and the ability to sustain school improvement efforts over time, even after administration changes take place.

Schools that have developed high leadership capacity take on a different character, however. Even if the principal is reassigned while the school is still in the transitional phase-which often happens-staff commitment can survive the change and even energize the new principal. Teachers find leadership in one another, assigning both credibility and authority to their peers. They tap into mutual authority by expecting others to identify problems and bring them to the group. When principals lead for "whenever they will not be there," as most of the principals in our study did, teachers share responsibility for the effectiveness of the school. Broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership contributes to lasting school improvement that is all too rare (Lambert, p. 65).

The constantly changing state of education compels us as leaders of learning to either transform our schools or be left in the dust. Effective administrators play various change agent roles in order to improve student achievement. Although the responsibility of transformation within a school is placed on the principal, building capacity and developing leaders at all levels can help diffuse the enormity of the task. As strata of leaders develop within an organization, it is the principal's job to recognize the strengths of those leaders and build up those strengths in order to facilitate school improvement and reform.

Professional Development

Fostering professional growth is the third critical element present in exemplary educational leaders. As a school community, quality professional development is essential in order to grow as an organization and impact student achievement. Currently in education, the term accountability has become somewhat of a buzzword. This being said, it is my belief that a majority of educators have always held themselves accountable for their students' achievement. Although many educators are committed to lifelong learning themselves, there are some practitioners who just get by. The term accountability can be a bit scary and confrontational to these individuals. On the other hand, to teachers who are consistently working on improving themselves and in turn their students, the added support (professional development) that comes with many of the No Child Left Behind (accountability) initiatives is welcomed and accepted. Although there are some components of the No Child Left Behind Act that do not seem to be in-sync with providing quality education to our students, the push for developing our nation's teachers is one step in the right direction. "Research has clearly shown that a good teacher is the single most important factor affecting student learning – more important than standards, class size, or money" (Geringer, 2003, p. 373). It is important that school administrators see to it that the educators in their buildings be good teachers. If we take into consideration that for every year of bad teaching that a student encounters, it can take approximately three years to counteract or compensate for it (Haycock, 1998), school administrators and district human resource personnel need to work quickly to lessen the instances of deficient teaching that occur. Educational leaders have a couple of avenues for halting poor teaching, the first one is to seek termination of the

teacher's employment, and the second is professional development to improve classroom instruction. The latter is certainly the most appealing option.

According to Whitaker, "Great principals focus on students – by focusing on teachers" (Whitaker, p. 35). In order to impact student achievement, we need" . . . to give them teachers who are enthusiastic about their subjects, who are steeped in their disciplines, and who have professional training as teachers and leaders" (Geringer, p. 374). This professional training can occur in various ways. There are a multitude of professional development models in existence that can meet the needs of each individual building. It is the administrator's responsibility to assess where the professionals in their building are and to determine what guidance they will need. Equally as important, is to seek out and present development to educators in need areas that are indicated by student data. When all things are considered, the instructional leader, often supported by a building leadership team, can determine where to begin, or in many cases continue professional development opportunities.

Fundamentally, growth can happen at all levels. In addition to teacher enrichment, the principal and other leaders will inherently grow as much as the teachers involved in the learning process. It is important to note that a building does not have to use a particular model of professional development in order to improve teaching and learning. Teachers can grow from simple collegial discussions with other staff members, if provided the time to do so. They can benefit greatly from opportunities to observe in other classrooms or participate in study groups with their peers. The educational leader can facilitate these opportunities by covering classrooms,

arranging for coverage within the building, making common planning time a priority or providing substitute teachers to cover classrooms.

More formalized on-going professional development models that utilize theory, demonstration, coaching and practice (Joyce & Showers, 2002) work well in some buildings and are supported by research. This model is optimal when there is devoted time to sustain the improvement efforts through frequent meetings (weekly if possible). Whatever route is determined best for the school, it is crucial that these efforts be fully supported by the building administrator and central office administration. As an administrator, "If we assume that all teachers do the best they know how, we can switch our attention to improving what they know" (Whitaker, p. 36). Providing these opportunities for professional growth will enhance the effectiveness of the teachers and ultimately impact student achievement. "As principals, we must recognize that unless we show teachers a better way, they will probably never even attempt a different instructional practice" (Whitaker, p.36). As professional growth and sharing become a way of life in the building, most teachers will respond favorably to professional development opportunities. Even those who are still a bit skeptical and do not buy into the learning wholeheartedly, will inevitably acquire pieces of added knowledge and introduce it into their daily practice. In order to meet the demands of the rapidly changing field of education, professional development is key to a school's success.

Leader of Service

Finally, servant leadership is another critical element in becoming an exemplary principal. Educational leaders are servants first, and leaders second. In wanting to help others,

we are servants to their needs, wants and desires. Anyone in public or private education is a servant to a certain extent. Administrators, although leading the school, are the greatest servants of them all. As leader of learning, the administrator is responsible for making student success and service to others the center of their vision. Sims, 2002 suggests, as noted in Sergiovanni, Synodical Schools, and Servant Leadership, that teachers and administrators should view education as a moral calling. She asserts that "education is on a different plane than any other model of organization. It is more than a business. It is deeper than a job. It involves people at their best and most noble engaging in tasks beyond that which can be measured and accomplishing together what no one could ever do alone" (Sims, p. 95). It is this notion that resounds the calling of educators to do what is right, which is to make our service to others come before that of our personal needs. I often hear educators saying that they did not become a teacher to make tons of money or get ahead in life. Most educators chose the field of teaching and learning because they care about kids and are driven to help them succeed. Additionally, most administrators cite their reasons choosing administration as centered around making a difference and impacting more students' lives through their interaction with a greater audience. The monetary reward of the promotion, although appreciated as well as deserved, is most generally secondary to the reward of fostering success in others. This selflessness, in my mind exudes servant leadership. "Effective leaders, on the other hand, have found meaning in their lives beyond the need for acclaim and are therefore free to be what Bogue (1985) calls servant leaders. Such leaders are able to set aside the need for public adulation. They see their mission in terms of serving, not being served" (Kuck, 1997, p. 44).

Not all teachers and administrators, although called to teach, lead and serve others can be lumped into the category of true servant leaders. Many times the "business" of education can get in the way and can cloud their judgment, muddy the waters and keep them from doing what is right. According to Stueber, 2000 educators display certain characteristics that classify them as servant leaders.

A servant leader displays foresight. Someone with foresight anticipates what is likely to happen and takes precautionary steps....A servant leader is committed to the growth of people. A principal who is committed to the growth of people demonstrates commitment to the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of each individual on the staff. A servant leader has an ability to conceptualize and communicate concepts. This leader has identified his core values and concepts and communicates these to staff, parents, and congregation members. The servant leader has highly developed powers of persuasion. This leader can motivate others to implement change. This leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce them into compliance. The servant leader listens receptively to what others have to say. When a problem arises, this leader responds by listening first. . . . The servant leader demonstrates acceptance of others and has empathy for them. The servant leader shows awareness and perception. This principal has an accurate perception of the current strengths and weaknesses of his school... The servant leader builds community in the schoolhouse. The servant leader practices stewardship. . . . The servant leader has the

ability to exert healing influence upon individuals and institutions. This is the person who can effectively calm people in stressful situations (Steuber, p. 50)

The role of the principal as servant leader is to empower others. In doing this we step back from the traditional leader role and use our strengths to build strengths in others. The authority in the role of administrator as I see it in servant leadership is replaced with service and stewardship to others. As leaders we need to ask ourselves the following question, "Do we expect people to follow us because we are [in charge] or because we are worthy of their 'followship', because we are doing what is right?". (Witcher, 2003, p. 28) This does not mean that the administrator does not make decisions or remain accountable for the school as a whole, quite the contrary. It means that the decisions that are made and the means for carrying out the business of the school revolve around the philosophy of empowering and helping others. In turn, all stakeholders within the school model servant leadership for the students. The students learn how to work with others and what it means to do the right thing.

As a future administrator, I plan on making it my priority to demonstrate servant leadership. Often, I have observed people in positions of power making choices based on unethical considerations. By being a leader who considers herself a servant, not only to the students and parents in the organization, but to the faculty and staff, community and society, I will maintain the highest of moral integrity in what I do and make decisions based on what is right. As I think of this, I remind myself that I may not always do things right, but I intend to do the right thing.

"By identifying and following a system of personal and professional ethics consistent with the best social and personal convictions, educational leaders can move toward restoring a system that has many broken parts. By consistently demonstrating a system that both addresses the issue effectively and is ethically and morally based, administrators can demonstrate that such a system is not only possible; it is better." (Witcher, p. 28)

I anticipate that gaining the experience that I need to become an exemplary educational leader will take me through many ups and downs. I believe that if I continue to develop myself in each of these critical elements, this path will be easier. Along the way, I intend to remain cognizant of the following core beliefs to help me drive my day to day decision making; building trusting relationships is crucial, open and honest communication is essential, teaching to reach every learner is imperative, and considering each situation on an individual basis will allow each and every stakeholder to feel empowered and valued. In addition, I plan on building upon my current strengths and the strengths of those around me. It will take the melding of these beliefs and critical elements as well as a lot of hard work and dedication to hone my leadership skills. As long as I remain driven to help others succeed and reflective in my practice, I am confident that I will continue to share my love of learning with the children I serve. "To the world you may be one person, but to one person you may be the world." (Unknown Author) If I can help develop a love of learning in one child or renew it within a staff member, then I will know that I am moving in the right direction.

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